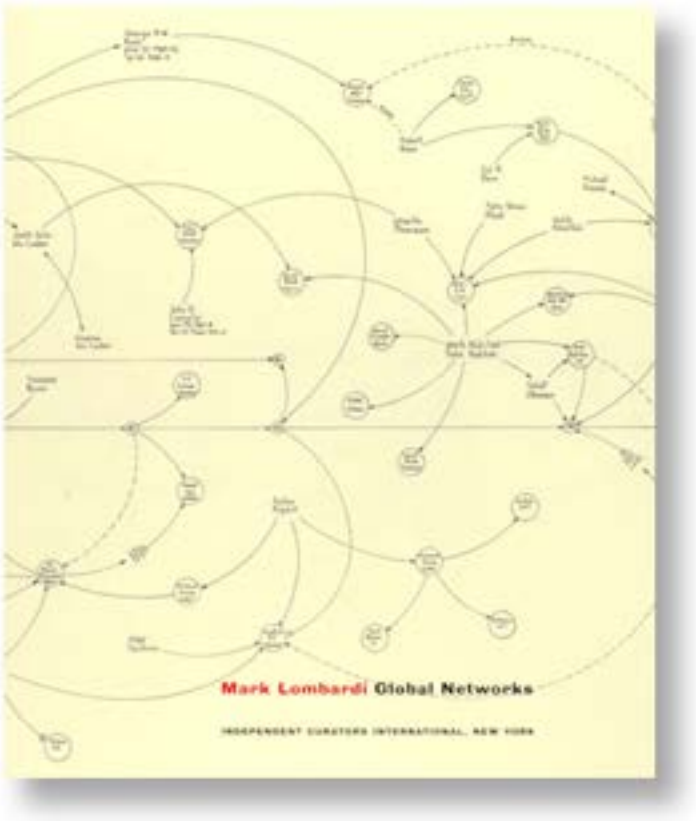

Mark Lombardi: Global Networks. New York: Independent Curators International in conjunction with D.A.P., 2003; pp. 38-41.

Text © Robert Hobbs

before re-presenting them with clarity and unity, which is a modus operandi for Lombardi's art. Lombardi considered this principle of disintegration and reintegration in cosmic terms when he mentioned in his notes the impact that Tantric theory had for his work.

From this brief look at the artistic strategies of Apollinaire, Duchamp, Beuys, and Haacke, it is clear that in formulating his own work Lombardi availed himself of a wide range of rigorous twentieth-century approaches. These tactics suggested a direction his investigations could take, without those earlier works determining the outcome of his own efforts. However, a summary consideration of Duchamp's and Haacke's contributions barely conveys the enormous impact that Conceptual art later had on the cutting-edge work of Lombardi and other artists. Constituting as radical a paradigm shift as Cubism did earlier, Conceptual art is predicated on differences between ontology and epistemology, as was the work of Duchamp, whose reputation was being revived at the time Conceptual art was emerging in the 1960s. Rather than regarding art as a surrogate being, as Apollinaire and Beuys did, some prescient Conceptual artists including Robert Berry, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner have explored the inability of art to manifest any essence, including thought, and have focused instead on the kinds of meanings it can and cannot communicate. Their researches are akin to Duchamp's readymades, which are directed more to art practices and modes of ratifying meaning than they are to fetishizing objects. Lombardi, an heir to this type of approach, was clearly aware of art's limited purview and the need to employ information as a catalyst or vector directing viewers to draw their own conclusions from the material before them. However, in taking the approach he did in his drawings, his understanding of Herbert Marcuse's aesthetics enabled him to fulfill a major goal of the Conceptualists while invoking formal and even transcendent issues by presenting the content of his art in terms of differences between form and subject matter.

HERBERT MARCUSE'S AESTHETICS

Even though Lombardi is a self-aware neo-conceptualist,[56] he felt no need to repeat a course already delineated. Instead of closely adhering to Conceptual art, which provided him with a distinct starting point for his work, he turned to the New Left aesthetic theory of Herbert Marcuse, who in the late 1920s had studied philosophy with Martin Heidegger and who later combined aspects of existentialism, phenomenology, and Marxism into his own cogent theory.

Lombardi once responded to an acquaintance at a party with the revealing advice, "And, yes. Herbert Marcuse—read [him]. All [you can] and more. For my work is based on Marcuse's writing."[57] Although known primarily for his leadership of the New Left and embodying the radical idealism of the student movement in the 1960s, Marcuse also advanced an aesthetic theory in which formalism is viewed, surprisingly, as a trenchant mode of political critique. This theory is evident

56. An important component of Lombardi's extensive library focuses on classic studies of Conceptual art, its antecedents, and its descendents. They include catalogues and books on such artists as Alice Aycock, Arakawa, Art&Language, Robert Barry, Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, Terry Fox, Davi Det Hompson, Joseph Kosuth, George Maciunas, Tom Marioni, and Yoko Ono. He also lists in his notes the importance of Hans Haacke's "analysis of corporate activities."

57. Norma Markley, "Statement," in **In Memoriam Mark Lombardi (1951– 2000)**, Pierogi, Brooklyn, New York, April 9, 2000.

in a number of his writings, and received its definitive stamp in *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*.[58] In this slender volume, Marcuse reflects on the revolutionary power of formalism—so often denigrated by Marxists as a necessary impediment to content or, more generally, an expendable attitude—by declaring art's truth to lie in the subtle, yet crucial difference between aesthetic form and the ideological content it is supposed to convey. Although Marcuse does not spell out the reasons for this disparity, one might assume it to occur when artists focus on their means, sometimes at the expense of their subjects. Because art's form—which is always an idealization, according to Marcuse—is at odds with the subject matter it encompasses, it is able "to break the monopoly of established reality. . . . In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality.[59] By "fictitious," Marcuse most likely refers to the fact that art's form—equated elsewhere in his book with utopian transcendence—comprises a different ideology from the ensconced one and thereby has the capacity to alienate viewers from their dominant worldview by interpolating them as subjects of an idealized or fictive one. While form and content might work more in tandem than differentially, as Marcuse indicates, this potential incongruity can become a decisive means for critiquing a given reality if the necessary idealization of forms is understood as being at odds with it.

This distinction between a light and lyrical form and an indicting or at least interrogative content is the fulcrum on which Lombardi's work is poised. He recognized this disparity when he wrote, "There is a slightly paradoxical element to the world that appeals to me as well; drawings which at first glance appear to be rather graceful maps or charts turn out, upon closer examination, to represent a vast and sometimes disturbing web of international political business associations."[60]

He pits the dry lyricism of his graphite traceries against the grand corruption of the subjects fascinating him. The result achieves a remarkable incongruity, on a par with Baudelaire's elegant poems about Parisian slums. The ideal realm of beauty to which Lombardi's drawings aspire is so out of kilter with his investigation of a Tom Clancy–type subject matter that his drawings function, according to Marcuse's theory, as a utopian vantage point from which to survey the labyrinthine international financial abuses that are so frequently the central focus of his art. Well aware that these topics could easily overwhelm the formal elements of his work, Lombardi cautioned his friends not to forsake too quickly the delicacy of his art for the corruption it reveals, since it is predicated on the dialectic between the two.[61] Viewers of his work might also detect the tension caused by such other polarities as the poetic and the analytical, or, aesthetic restraint and unbridled greed. While they might conflate these dialectics so that corruption is perceived as beautiful, the differential between the two can be considered a basis for perceiving disparities between these pairs, or, at the very least, oxymoronic and contingent units.

58. Herbert Marcuse, **The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977).
59. Ibid., p. 6.
60. Lombardi, "Proposal for **Over the Line.**"
61. Deven Golden, conversation with the author, Brooklyn, New York, August 25, 2001.

Perceptive critics often experience surprise when they recall that these diagrams, which bring to light a shadowy realm of corruption, are beautiful. *Art in America* critic Raphael Rubinstein wrote:

> For all their density of information, Lombardi's drawings are also visually engaging: dense clusters of circles and lines give way to wide spaces and sweeping arcs; other clusters break away from the central structure to form independent units; the entire web is as delicately balanced and interpenetrated as an Arshile Gorky drawing. These are objects that one can contemplate rewardingly as abstractions, taking no heed of their detailed references. But even as we look at them abstractly, Lombardi's drawings still offer a fascinating structural portrait of the hidden reality that surrounds us.[62]

New York Times critic Ken Johnson similarly noted this disparity:

> But they are also compelling as works of art. The airy, precise webs expanding up to four or five feet across suggest a vile order underlying apparent chaos; like the novels of Thomas Pynchon or John Le Carré, they exude a resonant poetry of paranoia. It's thrilling to contemplate the hidden, labyrinthine structures of real-world power that Mr. Lombardi so elegantly traces.[63]

However, the temptation to overlook the delicacy and restraint of Lombardi's masterful drawings in favor of the startling connections they reveal is great when one realizes the pervasive extent of the malfeasance committed by a relatively small community of big-time financial players across the globe.

A NEW LEFT ARTIST IN A NEW RIGHT WORLD

Lombardi's affinity for Marcuse was tied to this New Left philosopher's ideas about the value of the alienating effect of some art, which pries people away from the chimeras of dominant ideologies and enables them to see the world dialectically, individually, and passionately. This was a theme articulated in his landmark book *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society,*[64] which took issue with the hegemony of mid-twentieth-century corporate capitalism. Taking an approach similar to that of his fellow Frankfurt School associate Theodor Adorno, he bemoaned promoting great works as "classics" because their critical voice would be lost; that is, instead of being viewed as critical statements, they would be read as masterpieces and would be discussed in these limiting terms. Rather than inciting resistance, the shock that these works of art initially provoked would not even register among the medley of voices constituting a new corporate-based totalitarianism.[65] Marcuse wished to

62. Raphael Rubinstein, "Mark Lombardi at Pierogi 2000," **Art in America** 87, no. 6 (June 1999), p. 115.
63. Ken Johnson, "Mark Lombardi: 'Vicious circles,'" **New York Times**, November 5, 1999, p. E-41.
64. Herbert Marcuse, **One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
65. Ibid., p. 61.

lobby for the freedom that could only come from a recognition of the pernicious effects of dominant twentieth-century ideologies that commodified both people and their desires. In sync with Marcuse, Lombardi wanted art to maintain a critical edge and to pry people loose from habitual ways of thinking, so that they would look anew at their world and find far-ranging connections where none were thought to exist.

Marcuse's program of individuality through informed dissent was subsequently countered in the 1980s and 1990s by Reagan's New Right agenda and his policies of deregulation, privatization, and globalization. This had the net effect of demonizing "liberals" and their advocacy of social welfare, making Lombardi's continued subscription to Marcuse's ideas even more important. Although Reagan seemed to be offering a viable option for individualism, his concept was predicated on a revitalization of the frontier myth and its ideal of dominant patriarchies and subservient families. This ideal found favor with the Christian Right, which in the late 1980s began to align itself with the New Right—a development that is a subtext of Lombardi's drawing dealing with Pat Robertson and his network of business and political associates (cat. no. 24, p. 95). For Lombardi, the researcher of the drug wars, one of the many problems with this New Right was its promotion of supply-side economics, dubbed "Reaganomics," in which the troika of low taxes, reduced social-service expenditures, and increased military spending resulted in diminished interest rates, rising inflation, and extended budget deficits. For Lombardi, the artist, the failing of the New Right was its naïve belief in trickle-down economics, perpetrating the illusion that everyone would benefit. As his art so clearly demonstrates, the problem is that greed and its handmaidens cronyism and fraud consumed most of the offered tax relief, so that the rich became even richer. In light of these differences, we might characterize Lombardi's art as a concerted New Left critique of New Right practices.

ENVISIONING INFORMATION

Soon after Lombardi started in earnest to make fine-art diagrams of financial malfeasance, he began collecting examples of different types of graphs and flow-charts. They range from a U.P.I. press photograph of Robert Kennedy using a blackboard to demonstrate Teamster corruption (see fig. 12, p. 42), to a *Spy* magazine article outlining relationships among Hollywood actors and directors, to graphs detailing corporate alliances, money laundering, and drug trafficking, including *Time* magazine's diagram elucidating the BCCI scandal (fig. 13, p. 42).[66] "I'm not 'borrowing the visual vocabulary of the organizational diagram,'" he wrote in a statement reminiscent of Marcuse's approach, "because 'corporations . . . are our most familiar heirarchies' (though it's true) but because the corporate power is the predominant force in both the political process and society at large."[67] His collection of charts also includes a group of advertisements for Toyota cars and Hennessy cognac. Although this assortment reinforced the direction he was taking, it did not provide

66. The diagram, reproduced on page 40 of this catalogue, is from "The Dirtiest Bank of All," **Time**, July 29, 1991, pp. 42–43, © 1991 **Time** Inc. reprinted by permission.
67. Lombardi, unpublished notes, ca. 1995, in the Mark Lombardi archives at Pierogi, Brooklyn, New York.